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ABSTRACT

The integration of the undergraduate communication curriculum is a growing national challenge. Mergers of curriculum programs from different subdisciplines have occurred over time because of economic pressures and erroneous judgments about student and university needs. Student interest in the social sciences has declined, and communication programs have shifted their focus from rhetoric and argumentation to media technology. The expected merger of more speech and journalism programs raises the need to identify unifying principles in the communication subdisciplines. Those who promote "practical" approaches to curriculum building would support skills development at the expense of valuable comprehensive thinking. Students must learn that communication occurs in an environment, not a vacuum. If students learn communication theory well, they will be able to transfer and integrate the knowledge into other areas. Speech communication and journalism educators have the opportunity to strive for the challenge of integrating the two subdisciplines. The alternative is to continue to try to define communication in terms of its segmented fragments. (SG)

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# THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

by

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The Challenge of Communication Curriculum Integration

In recent years many universities have undertaken to merge programs, departments and even colleges in an attempt to meet student interest and/or to realign in order to reduce faculty and lower costs. Although these practical reasons are certainly understandable, there are some fundamental reasons for curricular integration that go much deeper. This paper explores several issues, concerns, observations, and suggestions related to the growing national challenge of integrating the undergraduate communication curriculum.

The need to examine emerging curricula is driven, in part, from problems which arise from the mergers of programs from different subdisciplines, and the resulting search for common foci among those programs. The search for commonality is difficult because, in many cases, the reason for the mergers had little to do with the content of the subject areas. Economic pressures and a need to realign faculty positions have played a major role in the merging of programs. However, perhaps the most powerful force may have been the result of a well-intentioned but erroneous judgement concerning student and university needs.

The assessment of student needs, a basic building block of curriculum development, was replaced in many cases in the 1970s by a near-panic rush to be "market responsive." That panic was fueled by reports of declining student enrollments, particularly in the arts and sciences. However, the roots of these changes reach beyond the 1970s, back to the 1960s as the first wave of those tempered by World War II, and reared in the glow of the post-war industrial boom reached America's universities.

The students of the sixties were cut from a different bolt of cloth than the generation which preceded them. Those earlier students were expected to study that which they were told to study, to learn that which they were told to learn. Universities enjoying record enrollments were able to demand that students leave curriculum development to the professionals. The basic authoritarian stance embodied in the slogan in loco parentis was the order of the day.

In his book entitled The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations, Christopher Lasch says educators have lost sight of the relationship of one branch of knowledge to another (p. 146). The year 1960 is offered by Lasch as the end of the "classic period" of the American university. Actually, the end of that period is closer to the end of the 1960s. In the view of Allan Bloom, author of The Closing of the American Mind, the social upheaval of the sixties was a catalyst which brought about a decline in the university system. According to Bloom, "professors, the repositories of our best traditions and highest intellectual aspirations, were fawning over what was nothing better than a rabble; publicly confessing their guilt . . . and expressing their willingness to change the university's goals and the content of what they taught." (p. 313) Thus Bloom believes the American university in the sixties was experiencing a dismantling of the structure of rational inquiry. He claims the university began to prey on whatever intense passion moved the masses and that our "real and poetic models" began to disappear.

Whatever the reason, and Bloom's view is far from universally accepted, the past decade saw tremendous changes in student enrollment. During that period, according to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, enrollment in literature courses declined 38 per cent. Enrollment in social sciences in general declined 37 per cent. During that same period, enrollment in communication

courses increased 138 per cent. The interest of the American student had clearly changed.

Change had also been rampant in communication programs. The realization of the emergence of the Information Age, with its feet firmly on technological ground, spurred interest in media technology courses, usually at the expense of courses in traditional areas such as rhetoric and argumentation. "Debate" has given way to a focus on "persuasion," and courses in "organizational communication," are common in many one-time Speech Communication departments and Journalism departments.

In the post-Watergate era, journalism education flourished. However, the popularity of journalism programs rests not with traditional journalism education. Experience tells us that every year more of the new students in the nation's journalism or communication programs are there to study public relations, advertising, marketing and other "careers" (translate "trades") that traditionally were secondary as to the study of news and editorial writing and broadcast journalism. Throughout the 1980s Communication programs have grown much faster than overall enrollment figures at 4-year colleges and universities. The majority of that increase came from students interested in advertising, public relations, or a plethora of new programs now being offered by most journalism schools under the label of communication. As a result, many of these journalism schools are now calling themselves schools of mass communication. Not all are pleased by these changes. Many mass communication educators are voicing the view that advertising and public relations should be taught in business schools.

Despite these objections, the future appears to hold the promise of more, not fewer, department or schools of communication. What are the likely results of the expansion of communication departments to cover areas such as organizational communication, corporate advocacy or public relations? What are the

issues which arise when Speech and Journalism departments merge? Are these changes beneficial or harmful to our students? Who should resolve these issues, if resolution is possible? These are a few of the challenges of integration.

Clearly, merging programs is both a problem and an opportunity. There is the potential to eliminate much of the fragmentation, over-specialization, and lack of integration between disciplines which too often characterize collegiate education. Dr. George Tade, Professor of Speech and Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication at Texas Christian University, gave an ACA presentation two years ago in which he put his finger on the nature of the problem in calling for "a willingness on the part of scholars to search for unifying principles in their respective disciplines and the courage to attempt collegiate experiments which span traditional boundaries between departments and bodies of knowledge." The major opportunity is for integration, and the reasons go far beyond financial and streamlining considerations.

Currently, we are involved in a search for unifying theory and commonality among the components of our sub-disciplines. Our field is lacking theory broad enough to cover the wide range of human communication, while at the same time specific enough to be tested and evaluated situationally.

Hopefully, our efforts to integrate curriculum will help in our search to develop unifying theory. It is the absence of such theory that makes curriculum integration difficult.

What usually seems to happen when programs merge is that a number of courses from both areas are thrown out and other courses are combined to make room in the new curriculum for both programs. Too often, the result is that the new curriculum consists of program specializations stacked side by side, each with its own vertical structure (and each with its own faculty advocate guarding his or her turf of specialization).

What is needed is integration, if integration must come, that occurs horizontally across these specializations. This will emerge from exploration of a unified departmental mission that emphasizes the shared goals and aims of their theoretical unit as opposed to artificial academic unit.

If we are to have departments of communication, it seems to us that ultimately we must face the question of what we expect a communication major to be. Not a "journalism major" within the communication department, or an "advertising major," or a "speech" major, or an "interpersonal major" but a communication major. A difficult task for a field that still cannot find agreement on what "communication" is.

Finally, there is the need to respond to those who call for increasingly "practical" approaches to curriculum building. That view would support training, rather than enlightenment--skill development rather than comprehensive thinking. It seems to us that a number of observations might be helpful:

1. The field of communication is expanding, not narrowing. Simple skills of writing and editing are totally insufficient in today's competitive world--and it is increasingly competitive.
2. We often prepare students for entry by acting as though what we teach will occur in a vacuum, when in fact, all that we do takes place in an environment. Most entry-level graduates have a reasonably good grasp of their skills, but they lack any awareness of the environment in which they are expected to function. If the graduate in his/her environment, engaged in a process, is seen as a component in a system, then the graduate must be said to know nothing of the system, and--therefore--is usually ignorant of his/her role within that system.
3. There is nothing so practical as a good theory. These words are not original, but they still are powerful. Graduates, for whatever

reason, have a difficult time with theory, and of any long range, comprehensive view of their field of communication. They thoroughly understand the basics of their area of specialization, be that journalism, advertising, or organizational behavior. What they lack is the grounding that would enable them to transfer what they have learned in one discipline and integrate it into another.

Is that any wonder? By and large, that lack of ability to integrate is characteristic of the programs which produced them. And, that lack of an ability--or a lack of willingness--to integrate stands in the way of the development of overbridging theory that has the power to explain what is happening in the broadest sense and with regard to specific applications.

We seem to be facing the same problems that confront nuclear scientists who sort through the "quarks" that are produced when neutrons and protons collide. As communication curriculum builders, we have seen two areas collide--those of traditional Speech Communication, and that of Journalism. The resulting curricula "debris" offers the opportunity for discovery for those with the courage to stray from their curricula turf and strive for the challenge of integration. The alternative is to continue to try to define the field in terms of its segmented fragments.